



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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PUBLIC COMMENT INVITED ON PETITION TO MODIFY
BACK BAY NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE ACCESS REGULATIONS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking public comment on a petition to allow limited access through Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia, for part-time residents of the Currituck Outer Banks.

The petition, which was published in today's Federal Register, was filed with the Interior Department by the Virginia Wildlife Federation and Pacific Legal Foundation. It seeks to have current regulations governing vehicular traffic on the refuge's 4.2-mile beach modified to enable about 150 families who own improved property south of the refuge, but do not live there full-time, to make 60 one-way trips a year through the refuge.

Under current rules, only permanent full-time residents of the Outer Banks and some qualified commercial fishermen are allowed to drive across the refuge beach. Owners of improved property who are part-time residents cannot use the beach shortcut and must take a more circuitous route, which can be as much as 100 miles longer, to reach their property.

The petitioners contend the increased but still limited access would not have any substantial adverse impact on the refuge environment. They say the 36 current permittees are authorized two trips across the beach a day for a maximum of 26,000 round trips a year. Granting additional permits for 60 one-way trips a year to the approximately 150 families owning property in the area would only increase the maximum allowable traffic by 4,500 round trips, a potential increase of 18 percent. The petitioners say actual usage of the refuge by permittees is far less than the allowed maximum and estimate that the total traffic added by increasing access would still fall below the 26,000 round trip limit allowed annually under current regulations.

Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge is located on the Virginia Outer Banks a few miles south of Virginia Beach. The refuge is a seasonal host to thousands of migrating and wintering waterfowl as well as the endangered peregrine falcon. Behind the barrier beach on which the refuge is located lies the fresh water Back Bay (known as Currituck Sound in nearby North Carolina) which supports an excellent largemouth bass game fishery.

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Vehicular traffic across the refuge's beach became an issue in the late 1960's when the increased popularity of the area drew more than 300,000 visitors, most of whom drove on the beach. In 1973, recreational vehicle use was prohibited, but limited access under permit was granted local property owners and others. In May 1980, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued rules closing the beach to all but permanent residents who could prove residency prior to December 31, 1976, qualified commercial fishermen, and emergency users. The December 31, 1976, date was later extended to December 31, 1979, by a Congressional Act in 1980.

The 60-day comment period on this petition to revise the refuge's access regulations ends November 17, 1981. Written comments should be sent to William C. Reffalt, Chief, Division of Refuge Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 18th and C Streets, N.W., Washington, D. C. 20240.

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